

ON SWIMMING IN THE S.F. BAY

While driving across the Golden Gate Bridge it is hard to imagine that people do swim regularly in the Bay.

As I drove on the freeway overpass, I could see the San Francisco Bay stretching out in front of me and to the right. It was a warm day, with gentle breezes—making it an ideal afternoon for the many sail boats leisurely and effortlessly gliding along on the water. There were a few fishermen hanging their poles out from the piers as I neared San Francisco's famed Fisherman's Wharf and I could smell the crab cooking in the big metal pots of the outdoor sidewalk restaurants. And, of course, the ubiquitous sea gulls were flapping overhead.

When I first learned that some people were actually swimming the Bay—and annually—I was amazed. But the members of the Dolphin Swim Club of San Francisco were doing just that, and have been since the club started in 1887.

Why does anyone swim in the Bay? "It's different," said Peter Bianucci, one of the club's swim commissioners. "It's free. I don't like swimming in a pool. (Here) I can just take off and swim down to Fisherman's Wharf or around the docks."

Bay swimming seems to have that same allure that road races hold for run-

ners. The confinement of a circular track or a concrete pool just doesn't appeal to some, so they head for the open spaces.

"Some of the faster swimmers do train in pools," Bianucci continued, "but there's a few of us who just swim in the Bay. I just enjoy swimming. Most of us couldn't go into any of the AAU races and make a good showing, but we enjoy swimming."

"They're not accomplished swimmers in the competitive sense," said another member, Jerry Hawryluk, "most are recreational swimmers. But the competition among the first 10 is terrific. They race for the honor of being the first."

The swimmers range in age from 16 to 70. Some of them were swimmers in school, some are runner-swimmers. Most of them swim to keep in shape.

They make up a diverse lot, with doctors, lawyers, electricians, bartenders, teachers and construction workers among their group. The Dolphin Club is a men's club, and thus they do not have women on the swims. Nor do they allow youngsters to swim with them.

by Diana Yee

"We've had some 16- or 17-year-olds swim with us who were sons of club members, but you have to watch out for yourself out there. You really have to have maturity," said Bianucci.

One club member is Harry Cordellos, who, though totally blind, has swum in the Bay for several years. He swims with another person who guides him toward the finish, compensating to the right or left as he hears the directions.

There are seven annual swims in the Bay. Most of them either begin or finish in the club's harbor near Fisherman's Wharf. The first swim of the season (beginning in April or May) is the one-mile Cove Swim. The results of this swim are recorded and swimmers are given time handicaps for future swims. Each annual swim is timed, recorded and awards are often given.

Another annual swim is to Alcatraz Island, $1\frac{1}{4}$ miles from the San Francisco shoreline. It has been traditionally thought that escape from this island prison was impossible due to the unnavigable waters and sharks lurking in the vicinity. These are merely tales says Bianucci. But, of course, one must know the currents and weather, and even a mile is not an easy swim without proper conditioning.

There have also been swims to Treasure Island, Sausalito and Angel Island. "Most of our swims are with the current, like the Alcatraz and Golden Gate swims," says Bianucci. "Actually, they're cross-current swims, so there's a lot more involved than just distance." Most of it is navigation.

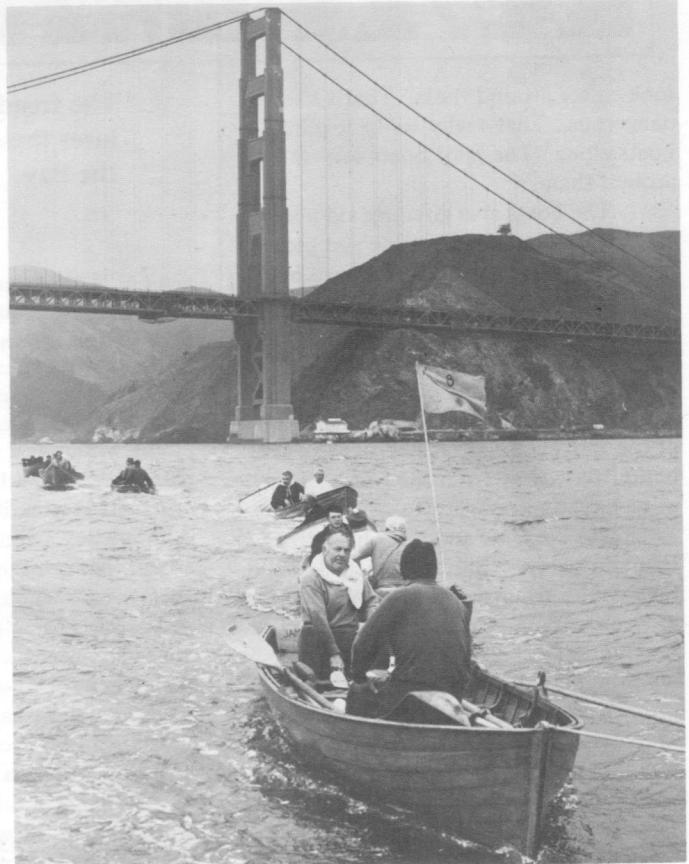
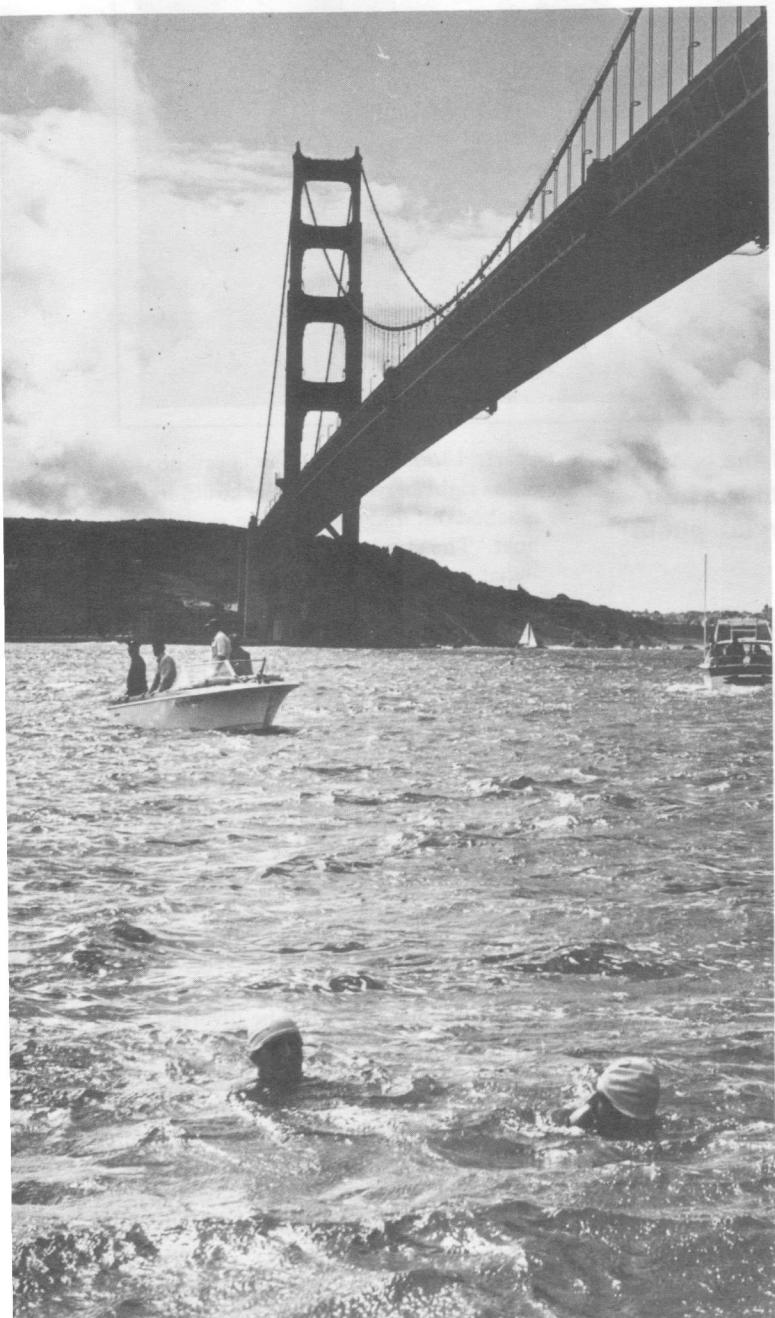
Navigation is not only seeing where you are, but seeing where you're going and finding the most efficient way to get there. It's a tricky problem, especially for the beginner. As the swim commissioner says, "You can't follow the dotted line on the bottom." One of the first steps in Bay navigation is to start with a good stroke.

"I've gotten to the point where I don't use the crawl too much anymore," continued Bianucci. "I use a single over-arm, which is like a side stroke with the scissors kick and only the back arm coming out of the water. It's relaxing, but I can also keep my head out of the water and can always see where I'm going. That's why I like it better (than the crawl)." Others do use the crawl stroke, the breast stroke or, like Bianucci, something of their own invention.

"A lot of guys who swim the crawl stroke keep their faces in the water. They take a high point to aim for but they won't



(above) Pilot boats pick up tired swimmers and render aid when needed. (l.) Harry Cordellas (l.) is totally blind, but swims the Bay regularly. (below) After the Golden Gate Swim, the pilot boats are towed back to shore. (Hawryluk photos)





look to see around them. That's a little dangerous. That's why we have pilot boats along. The pilot boats can see all around them."

The boats also give any aid necessary to a swimmer in trouble and pick up weary swimmers. "We try to have one pilot boat for each swimmer," added Bianucci.

Even with these precautions, though, there are humorous stories of swimmers who have swum in circles, ending up back at the starting point or who have swum completely away from the finish. Lack of navigation know-how.

The currents and tides have to be figured closely. "Basically the tide book says you're going to get so many minutes of slack water," said Bianucci, "but it'll roughly tell you at what time, and five or ten minutes can make a lot of difference."

When the swim is with the current, as most of them are, they check for a maximum current to get a good push. But even with that, they must still adjust their swim for wind and for currents which may form around objects in the water.

The freedom of the ocean lures these swimmers into the Bay. (Hawryluk photo)

"The water doesn't all just flow in and then flow out. Often it will create whirlpools around objects, like bridge pilings, or start to change, going in and out like fingers," Bianucci explained.

The ideal conditions for Bay swimming would be a slack tide, with a pushing current, and little or no wind. And the best season, if there *can* be a best season for Bay swimming, is at the end of April through the summer. The water begins to warm up from its winter low of 46 degrees to a "high" of 60 degrees. Even so, some swimmers are nearly frozen when they come out of the water.

And the Bay, being *the* Bay, also poses another problem: what do you do if a ship wants to share your pool?

Bianucci tells this story of what can happen: "I was swimming with another fellow, and we were perhaps 30 feet

apart. I looked up and saw a sail boat come right between us. We could have reached out and touched the side of the boat. The guy looked like he was asking, 'What are you guys doing in our course?'"

Jerry Hawryluk had another swimmer versus boat match during the 1942 Golden Gate Swim. "This was during the war years, and we had a convoy going right through where we were swimming. I looked up and it looked like a skyscraper coming down on me. It's a horrible feeling to look up and see this big ship sailing down on you. Another fellow got in between a barge and a tug that was towing it."

And occasionally, one of these near-misses turns into tragedy. A swimmer was killed in 1962 by a boat on automatic pilot which could not be diverted.

To prevent further mishaps, the swims are now coordinated with the San Francisco Marine Exchange. The Exchange is notified in advance of the swims and the routes to be used and then re-directs shipping traffic.

Unfortunately, it cannot re-route

some of other moving hazards of the Bay. Some of the swimmers find themselves fending off curious seals which sometimes accompany swimmers. "We've had swimmers who've been bitten by the seals. It's very seldom, but you have to keep an eye out," said Bianucci.

"And there's not a lot of fish in the water, but there's lots of debris. Every once in a while someone will come in with a black eye."

Many of the experienced swimmers have developed their own secret techniques, courses and even pre-swim diets. Some prefer eating a large meal several hours before a swim, while others prefer to not eat at all. Most of the swimmers, however, are fond of eating some honey prior to the swims. "Everyone brings their own secret mixes of honey to have before starting," Bianucci noted.

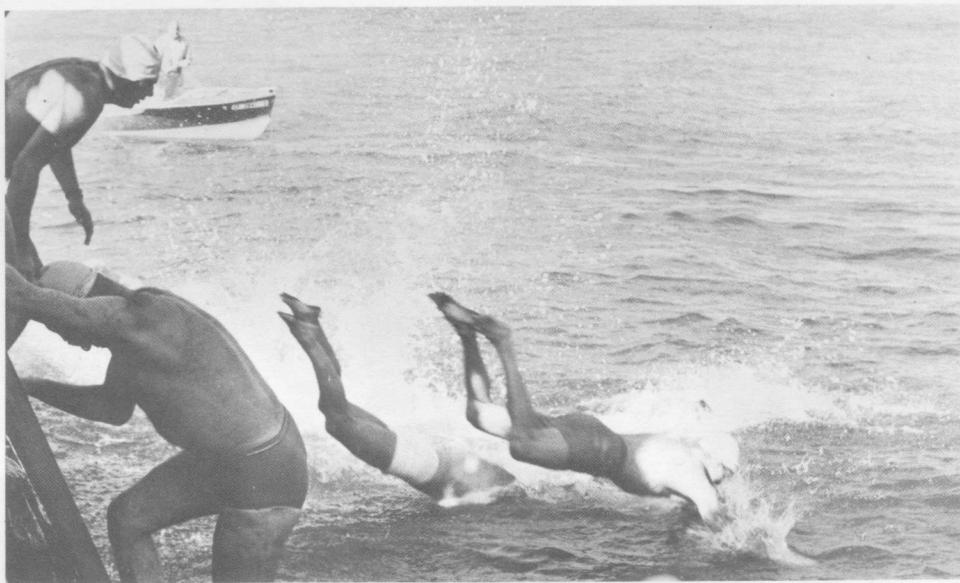
The swimmers are not allowed any special equipment during the swims other than a pair of goggles to ward off eye irritation. The Coast Guard also requires that all swimmers wear fluorescent orange caps so they can be easily spotted in the water. Numbers on the caps also help timers identify each finisher and record their times.

The *Big Swim* is the Golden Gate Swim. This is the one all the swimmers "point" toward, the finale of the season in August. It is almost a mile under the Golden Gate Bridge from the San Francisco side southward to the finish at Lime Rock on the Marin County side of the Bridge. Finishers have been timed as fast as 19 minutes, a club, and probably world, record. Ed Duncan has been the top swimmer in this contest since 1965.

"The secret," Bianucci explained, "is to pick up your currents. An inexperienced swimmer will usually swim straight for the Rock (Lime Rock) because he knows that the shortest distance between two points is a straight line. (But) the current will be coming up so strong he'll end up on the beach somewhere. The experienced swimmer will swim on an outgoing current and get inside the Bay before cutting over and clearing the Bridge's south tower. If he did it right, he'll end up swimming a straight course." But everyone has their own secret course and everyone has made mistakes.

"We talk about the tide as if in ideal conditions," said Hawryluk, "but the tide changes and moves. There's always the human error too."

Navigation is the key to Bay swimming, but it can be a frustrating lesson for the beginner. (Hawryluk photos)



Each person has his own way of starting: some dive, some jump, others walk down the ladder.



The water reaches a "high" of 60 degrees, but some swimmers are nearly frozen after a swim.

